

## **Review: ‘The Force of Things,’ an Indirectly Audible Opera**

The New York Times

October 10, 2017 Tuesday 00:00 EST

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**Section:** ARTS; music

**Length:** 787 words

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**Highlight:** In its American premiere, Ashley Fure’s subtle experimental work plays like a cross between a gallery art show and a black-box theater spectacle.

### **Body**

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MONTCLAIR, N.J. — In the 50 years since Robert Ashley wrote “[That Morning Thing](#),” some strategies for making new opera have become clear. Composers may sub out a symphony orchestra for pretaped material or electronically aided arrangements; linear narrative flow is often abandoned for more [abstract approaches](#); vocalism can encompass speaking, screaming and much else beyond traditional lyricism.

But these once-renegade moves are now at risk of seeming like their own orthodoxy, prime targets for would-be operatic disrupters. In its American premiere this weekend at Montclair State University, the composer Ashley Fure’s “The Force of Things: An Opera for Objects” manages the tricky task of doing justice to opera history while also striving for truly fresh effects. Written for three percussionists, two vocalists and a pair of woodwind specialists, the work was given a site-specific staging inside the school’s Alexander Kasser Theater as part of the Peak Performances [series](#).

At its final presentation on Sunday, this experimental opera played like a cross between a gallery art show and a black-box theater spectacle. Over its hour-plus duration, audience members were allowed to move through most of the warehouselike, 150-foot-long space.

Upon first entering that space, audience members heard deep bass tones coming from subwoofers placed on the floor and aimed at the ceiling. Those audible sounds disappeared quickly, yet some of the subwoofers could still be seen shaking.

Even when the frequencies were too low to be audible, the sound waves vibrated strings that ran from the subwoofers up to large sculptures made from plastic, trace paper and silicon to suggest the molted skin of some mythological beast. (These rattling sculptures were part of an overall environment designed by the architect [Adam Fure](#), the composer’s brother.) Sometimes one sculpture shimmied on its own; other times, multiple sculptures produced a strange chordal effect.

A change in the lighting signaled the conclusion of this initial section. Two vocalists — Alice Teyssier and Lucy Dhegrae, whispering, barely, through small megaphones — appeared, and the audience was beckoned into the center of the space. There were more subwoofers connected to yet more ropes, both bisecting the room, as well as a row of percussionists and a woodwind player on each side of the space.

The performers — the bassoonist Rebekah Heller, the saxophonist Ryan Muncy and the percussionists Ross Karre and Levy Lorenzo, all from the International Contemporary Ensemble, and the percussionist Dustin Donahue — occasionally placed metallic, wooden and other objects atop the subwoofers. Some bowed mysterious, half-cylindrical Styrofoam objects and aircraft cables.

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A wide variety of rhythmic and harmonic combinations emerged from the meditative hum of this ensemble. Just as the woodwind players and the percussionists moved around, the audience members were encouraged to explore the space (as quietly as possible). I placed myself near a percussionist at one side, while the two woodwind players serenaded the majority of the audience at the opposite end. The thrum coming from one percussionist's steady strike on one of the ropes merged with long-held saxophone and bassoon pitches, creating a wondrously active drone texture.

In what way was this actually an opera? In remarks before the performance, Ms. Fure described the unseen and hard-to-perceive elements of her sonic world as a metaphor for the encroaching anxieties related to climate change and the slow, quiet processes of the natural world.

I didn't come away with that same impression; the sonic textures and surroundings gave little sense of the organic. But Ms. Fure's focused exploration of the rich possibilities embedded in objects I thought I knew — like bass-tone-blasting subwoofer cones — was successfully dramatized. And opera, at its most fundamental, is musical drama.

It certainly wasn't traditional. The Metropolitan Opera's slogan [this season](#) holds that "The voice must be heard," but it was barely heard for most of "The Force of Things."

That is, until the final minutes, when the singers were liberated from their whispery megaphone duties and began to produce luminous tones, with slight glissando slides, as they sat among the audience. After we had gone through a collective, thorough contemplation of oft-ignored, barely detectable causes and effects, the operatic voice was ready to sing — and to sound truly, traditionally beautiful — once more.

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**Language:** ENGLISH

**Document-Type:** Review

**Publication-Type:** Web Blog

**Subject:** MUSIC COMPOSITION (90%); MUSIC GROUPS & ARTISTS (90%); OPERA (90%); ORCHESTRAS (90%); THEATER (90%); MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS (89%); PERCUSSION INSTRUMENTS (89%); SCULPTURE (89%); SINGERS & MUSICIANS (89%); WIND INSTRUMENTS (89%); ARTISTS & PERFORMERS (79%); ARCHITECTURE (74%); SPACE EXPLORATION (73%); Classical Music (%); International Contemporary Ensemble (%); Kasser, Alexander, Theater (%); Montclair State University (%); Fure, Ashley (1982- ) (%); The Force of Things: An Opera for Objects (Musical Work) (%)

**Ticker:** International Contemporary Ensemble; International Contemporary Ensemble; Kasser, Alexander, Theater; International Contemporary Ensemble; Kasser, Alexander, Theater; Montclair State University

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**Person:** Fure, Ashley (1982- )

**Geographic:** NEW JERSEY, USA (79%)

**Load-Date:** October 21, 2017

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